ON PAGE A16
NEW YORK TIMES
8 April 1987

Behind Embassy Affair: Complacency on Spying

News Analysis

By STEPHEN ENGELBERG
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 7 — While spy versus spy is an accepted part of the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union, American officials believe a combination of Soviet persistence and American complacency has given Moscow a distinct advantage in the game in recent years.

Indeed, many officials say that the most disturbing aspect about the spate of recent American lapses at the embassy in Moscow and here at home is the far-reaching, systemic weaknesses they reveal in security procedures.

American intelligence agencies were too complacent, they say, both about Soviet abilities in technical intelligence gathering and about the need for rigorous personnel security procedures.

A wide variety of explanations for this complacency have been advanced, including an unwarranted contempt for Soviet technical abilities, the generally more relaxed atmosphere in international relations that followed the period of détente in the early 1970's, and a reluctance to intrude on the civil liberties of Government employees, in reaction to past abuses in the name of national security.

Seduction of Marines

Some dubbed 1985 "the year of the spy" and expected the lessons of the highly publicized cases of that year — including that of Edward Lee Howard, a former Central Intelligence Agency analyst who fled the country after being identified as a spy by a Soviet defector — to be acted upon.

Now 1987 has brought charges that some of the Marine guards who were supposed to keep Soviet spies out of the Moscow embassy instead let themselves be seduced into allowing agents of the K.G.B., the Soviet state security agency, into its most secret rooms.

Failure to fully appeciate or react to Soviet technical abilities has been consistent in the last decade.

In the early 1970's, for example, at a time when the United States was making major strides in technological surveillance, many intelligence officials incorrectly assumed the Soviet Union was unable to produce advanced eavesdropping devices.

Listening Devices in Structure

That myth was shattered when officials discovered a decade later, after the Soviet Union was allowed to do much of the construction work on a new American embassy building in Moscow at a closed site, that Soviet agents had planted electronic surveillance equipment in the steel frames of the building.

At a news conference today, President Reagan said the new building would not be occupied until he is assured that it is safe and secure.

Senior American officials seemed, in the mid-1970's, to hold a view of Soviet espionage that was frozen in a period 20 years before, when Soviet agents wore ill-fitting clothes and spoke English poorly.

There also appeared to be an assumption that no American working with highly sensitive data was likely to be susceptible to recruitment by a Communist country. The various American security agencies took comparatively few precautions with millions of Government employees who handled classified information.

For years, most of these employees were allowed to leave their offices without ever worrying about the possibility of even a random inspection of briefcases. Initial investigations before hiring were cursory, and little time was spent re-investigating people.

An Increase in Arrests

In the last two years, however, Americans have been arrested on espionage charges on the average of once a month, many of them Government employees.

All of this is not to suggest that the West has not scored similar successes. On rare occasions, the United States has recruited agents in the Soviet Union who had access to highly secret technical information.

Although it has not made much progress in cracking Soviet coding systems, the National Security Agency has eavesdropped on senior Soviet officials speaking on their car telephones. It also ran an operation that harvested reams of Soviet military communications from undersea cables.

In addition, Soviet agents have been trapped several times in "sting" operations in which the American they were recruiting actually worked for the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The Effects of Détente

But American officials generally failed to realize the Soviet Union was improving its intelligence capabilities in the early 1970's.

United States-Soviet relations in that period were improving, and those who raised security concerns were seen, sometimes justifiably, as using them to undermine the policy of détente.

The Nixon Administration agreed in 1972 to allow the Soviet Union to occupy one of the highest points in Washington — an ideal site for conducting electronic interception — for its new embassy. And it allowed the new American embassy building in Moscow to be built by Soviet workers without thorough American inspection.

The lack of vigilance in the technical arena was more than matched by failings in personnel security. Some of this, officials say, was a reaction to an earlier period when counterintelligence departments of the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. were perceived to be running amok.

Both agencies were implicated during the Congressional investigations of the 1970's in large-scale efforts to spy against Americans. Further, the C.I.A.'s counterintelligence operations were run by James J. Angleton, an official who was so obsessed with ferreting out Soviet agents that his activities, some contended, ended up harming the very agency he was trying to protect.

In the lore of the C.I.A., Mr. Angleton's ideas about counterintelligence, and his high regard for the Soviet ability to penetrate any level of Government, are these days dismissed as "sick think."

Mr. Angleton said today in a telephone interview that "we were within our mandate" from the executive branch when the surveillance was done.

As to the suggestion that he might have been obsessed with Soviet efforts to penetrate the United States Government, Mr. Angleton remarked: "I would say that any student of American counterintelligence going way back would know there was a steady stream of penetrations. In those days there was no dispute about it."

All of these factors created institutional biases against those who favored better security. These were matched by a tendency in the military and elsewhere to treat security as a secondary consideration, one of the first things to suffer when budgets are cut.

From the mid-1970's until well into the 1980's, the United States placed extraordinary faith in the reliability of its Government employees. The affair of the Marine guards at the Moscow embassy is only the latest example of the extent to which this country has put its faith in the trustworthiness of individuals.

Continued

2.

Esprit de Corps Not Enough

The television monitors that watched sensitive areas at the embassy, for instance, were fed back to a Marine command post, suggesting that no one ever dreamed the Soviets could succeed in compromising Marine guards.

The embassy had no electronic system for recording how long secured doors were left open, and it is not clear whether surprise inspections required by State Department procedures were ever carried out.

"What we relied on too much was the fact that we had a small unit of people with esprit de corps, and if an individual went astray in the group we thought we had a means of finding out," Arthur A. Hartman, the former Ambassador to Moscow, recently told a Congressional subcommittee. "We were wrong."